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U.S. plunges to a barren low in space fulfillment

STAT
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America's space program has hit rock bottom.

That's the assessment of private space companies, space policy experts and military and civilian satellite owners, whose equipment in recent months has fallen out of the sky, blown up on the launch pad or been shoved into storage.

STAT After three successive launch failures, involving the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the Air Force, the nation's ability to put any kind of payload into space is virtually gone.

The crowning, if temporary, blow came yesterday when NASA decided to ground for four weeks the Atlas-Centaur rocket series, the nation's only remaining launch vehicle.

The Atlas-Centaur's engine is similar to one that malfunctioned in a Delta rocket Saturday, sending the vehicle and the \$57.5 million weather satellite it carried careening out of control.

Users of the nation's space program, already facing backlogs due to the Challenger disaster and two successive explosions of the Air Force's Titan rockets, said the Delta crash threw them into an even more untenable position.

Sources familiar with U.S. weather and spy satellites, as well as President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative or "star wars" program, said their programs are in potential jeopardy, along with the nation's pride and prestige.

In contrast, Europe's Arianespace agency has added launches to its schedule to accommodate new contractors and the Soviet Union scored propaganda points this week when two cosmonauts for the first time ferried between a pair of orbiting space stations.

STAT "This has got to be the darkest period in the American space program since Sputnik," said John Pike, associate director for space policy with the Federation of American Scientists.

"It looks bad," he said, but added, "It probably looks a lot worse than it is."

"The Red Chinese have offered to launch our satellites," said Milt

Copulos, a senior analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation. "We're in rather desperate straits," he added.

Because of NASA's decision to halt production of expendable launch vehicles like the Delta in favor of the reusable shuttle, the nation now has a dwindling supply of rockets. Three Deltas, three Atlas-Centaurs and seven Titans remain.

But even if they could be used, the rockets' payload bays already are reserved. And the only other vehicle, the shuttle, could be grounded for a year or more.

"It's going to delay everything we're doing because we don't have a space launch program now," an Air Force spokesman said of experiments for SDI, a proposed space shield against ballistic nuclear missiles.

"When the shuttle went down we could at least still launch some of the critical requirements on Titan," said the spokesman, who requested anonymity, but is familiar with Air

Force space programs. "We went from having full capability to losing the ... shuttle, which is a large part of our heavy launch capability, to losing the rest of our heavy launch capability."

Two SDI projects that were scheduled for launch this year have been put on hold.

One experiment, code-named Teal Ruby and scheduled for the first shuttle flight out of California's Vandenberg Air Force Base in July, was to test whether infra-red, or heat, sensors could detect and track cruise missiles and bombers.

A second SDI project tentatively was scheduled to ride into space aboard a Delta in August.

SDI spokesman Maj. Dave Rigby said the projects "were not critical, they're not going to bring the program to a grinding halt."

Officials are reviewing "other means" to launch the projects, Maj. Rigby said.

"If the shuttle is grounded for 12 months, we'll have 10 critical DOD projects backed up on the [launch] pad," the Air Force spokesman said. A two-year shuttle grounding would delay 21 projects, he said.

SDI officials understandably are concerned.

"Tearing their hair out" is probably not right," the spokesman said. "It's a situation that everyone's watching very closely."

Also presumably watching the space program's troubles are the nation's intelligence agencies — chiefly the ultra-secret National Reconnaissance Office, which operates

U.S. spy satellites, and the Central Intelligence Agency, which uses the data they gather.

Two KH-11 spy satellites were destroyed during the Titan failures at Vandenburg last month and in August 1985, leaving, according to reports, a single satellite of the type in orbit.

"My understanding is that they don't have anything else," Mr. Pike said. The newer KH-12 satellites are so hefty they can only be launched on the shuttle.

"If it [the remaining KH-11] did go bad, you'd just have to put the shuttle on the pad at Vandenburg, pop a KH-12 in it and let it rip," he said.

"I'm sure they're praying it won't fail," Mr. Pike said. "I'm also sure they're reasonably confident that their prayers will be answered. It's been a pretty reliable bird thus far."

Said CIA spokeswoman Sharon Foster: "We don't really want to give out any comments about what we're concerned about or what we're not concerned about."

In an eerily similar position is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which has only a single storm-tracking satellite that is doing the work of two.

The satellite, alternately stationed over the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, was put into orbit in 1983 and has a five-year lifespan. Its prospective companion was destroyed in the Delta crash.

"It's pretty serious," said Larry Heacock, NOAA's director of satellite operations. "We feel that there's a high probability there will be at least a limited period where we will have no GOES [weather] satellites in operation" between now and 1990.

Companies hoping to commercialize satellite delivery hope that some good will come out of NASA's woes and the agency will agree to an industry takeover of the Atlas and Delta programs. It has agreed to those steps in principle but, critics charge, deliberately blocked their implementation.

"We feel this strengthens the case for commercializing the system and letting NASA get on the cutting edge of R&D [research and development]," said Rick Endres, director of corporate development for Transpace Carriers Inc. The company two years ago signed an agreement with NASA to take over the Delta program, but has yet to make a single launch.

If commercialization had been expedited, said the Heritage Foundation's Mr. Copulos, "You could have had that [Delta] line in production now and ready to fly."